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Farnsworth attributes success to power of grace

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FARNSWORTH ATTRIBUTES SUCCESS TO POWER OF GRACE

During the Christmas season, there's a good chance your family gathered around the television to bask in the nostalgia of the 1946 Jimmy Stewart classic "It's a Wonderful Life." You cheered as the townspeople dumped their money on George Bailey's living room table. You smiled as precocious tow-head Zuzu told her beaming parents what "Teacher says" about bells and angel wings.

What you probably didn't do, however, is ask yourself, "So what happened next?"

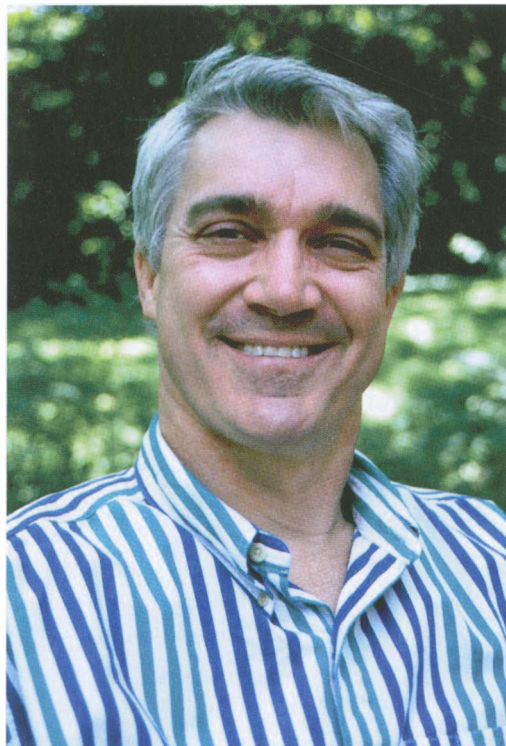
It was that question that prompted commercial musician Bob Farnsworth to embark on his most unusual artistic venture yet — a film treatment and screenplay for "It's a Wonderful Life: The Rest of the Story."

Farnsworth, a 1974 Furman graduate and founder of Hummingbird Productions in Nashville, Tenn., is best known for his work on the "Budweiser Frogs" ad that made such a splash during the 1995 Super Bowl. Yet he sees the film project as among his most meaningful efforts. "It's something this country really needs — a story about forgiveness," he says.

In his upbeat, scattered way, Farnsworth tells stories peppered with references to religious leaders and theologians from Rick Warren to C.S. Lewis to Friedrich Nietzsche as he riffs on the themes of grace and forgiveness in his life.

Reflecting on his Furman years, he recalls economics instructor James Johnson, the "most gracious of all professors." At one point Farnsworth was at risk of losing his scholarship after a bout of mono interrupted his studies. Everything rode on two courses — French and economics. Although Farnsworth says he had a "solid A" in French, the professor gave him a B. "Mr. Farnsworth, you're not an A student," she said.

He needed at least a B in economics to retain his scholarship, but by exam time a B seemed hopeless. He called Johnson the night before to say he was going to fail the exam and would rather not take it at all. The professor responded, "Mr. Farnsworth, you're not a failing student. If you show up — even if you get a zero — I will not fail you." Free of the fear



of failure, Farnsworth felt motivated to study all night, and got an A on the exam.

He sees a gracious hand at work in his professional life as well. When he contacted 68-year-old Carolyn Grimes, who played Zuzu in "It's a Wonderful Life," he found her eager to reprise her role, even though she had not acted since her teen-age years. Chance meetings and serendipitous connections also enabled him to present his film treatment to executives from Walden Media, producers of the "Chronicles of Narnia" movies. While no deal has been struck, Farnsworth has scheduled a second meeting with Walden and is hopeful that doors will open for the film.

"Sometimes you ask God, 'Where are you?' And other times pieces just come together," he says with confidence that his current endeavor will fall into the latter category.

Even doors that have closed for Farnsworth seem to have paved the way for his success. After a Furman Concert Choir trip to Brazil, during which the group did

mission work while singing in Belem, he felt called to spend his life pursuing such efforts, and to fund them through music. A guitarist and singer, he and his friend Mike Hudson '73 moved to Nashville after graduation and were eventually signed by a record label. They were billed as "the next Simon and Garfunkel," but soon thereafter "Saturday Night Fever" ushered in the age of disco — and effectively killed, in Farnsworth's words, "the folksy stuff."

Farnsworth then began working with a friend from his church who did commercials — and learned enough about the jingle business to start his own company, Hummingbird Productions. Its big break came when it landed an account with McDonald's and produced a host of ads.

Over the last 30 years Hummingbird (www.hummingbirdproductions.com) has earned four Clios (the "Oscar of the ad world") and a place for the Budweiser Frogs campaign in the Clio Hall of Fame alongside iconic ads for Oscar Mayer Weiners and Apple's "1984" commercials, among others.

The frogs were "simple genius," Farnsworth says, crediting the D'Arcy ad agency of St. Louis with the core of the idea. The campaign was the first to brand the name of the product with an animal sound, starting a trend that may well have inspired such fare as the popular AFLAC duck commercials of today.

What's the reason behind Hummingbird's success? "I don't know, but there's a purpose. Maybe it's this," Farnsworth says, gesturing to the "It's a Wonderful Life" script.

Ever mindful of gracious providence, Farnsworth insists that no one should take too much credit for themselves. "There are too many things that have to fall into place," he says. "It's all a gift, so there is no legitimate room for arrogance. I'm still waiting for people to figure out that I'm no good."

— JESSICA MILLER KELLEY

The author, a 2003 Furman graduate, is a book and magazine editor in Nashville.